



Pick Your Path to Health

An Ounce of Prevention (with Screening Tests) is Worthy Medicine

It's been said over and over: "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." Preventing disease may not always be possible, but screening tests may catch diseases early—before they catch you.

Heart disease, cancer, and stroke are the top killers of American women. And African American women are also at high risk for diabetes, pneumonia, and AIDS. How long women survive with some of these diseases, such as breast cancer, is directly related to how early the disease is found. Unfortunately, women of color are often not diagnosed until a disease has already reached a critical stage. That is why screening is so important.

A screening test looks for symptoms in people who may be at risk for certain diseases. Screening is worthy medicine. Screening saves women's lives.

But there are so many tests out there, how do you know which ones you need? Ask your doctor or local health professional. They will consider your age, family medical history, and current lifestyle to decide which tests are needed. In general, African American women need to be screened for factors related to the major diseases. These factors include high cholesterol, high blood pressure, diabetes, and obesity.

Some screening tests are simple, painless, and inexpensive, such as checking weight, blood pressure, sight, and hearing. Others are more complicated but are critical in saving lives. These include: blood tests for high cholesterol, HIV, and diabetes; a Pap smear to check for cervical cancer; mammography to check for breast cancer; fecal occult tests or colonoscopy to check for colon cancer; and a treadmill test for heart disease.

According to experts, early detection is the best protection women have, particularly when it comes to breast and cervical cancer. These two diseases disproportionately kill so many more African American women compared to the rest of the population that it's important to be tested early and on a regular basis.

Age also plays a role in the types of screening doctors may recommend. Women over 40, for example, should have a mammogram at least every 1 or 2 years and a Pap test every year. When they are over 65, women are more apt to have certain conditions that can cause disability or death, many of which can be improved after testing. These include hearing and vision loss, osteoporosis (fragile or brittle bones), mental impairment, depression, and bladder problems.

If you don't have a regular doctor, talk to the medical professionals at a clinic near you. Many local health agencies, hospitals, universities, and support groups offer free or low-cost screening tests and health information, and all states have programs that cover the cost of mammograms if your insurance does not. In many cases, these programs will help women find transportation to the site and childcare if needed. Some programs also offer other services to help women who want to lower their risk of diseases, for example, by stopping smoking or practicing safe sex. It might take some time to find affordable screening tests, but your own hard work could save your life. Now that's empowerment.

Screening guidelines are available to doctors and clinics from the U.S. Agency for Health Care Research and Quality, part of the Department of Health and Human Services. But it is up to each woman to talk with a health professional about her individual situation so that screening tests can be tailored to her needs. Don't delay these tests, experts warn. They could save your life and put you on a path to a long and healthy future.

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health education campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign, please call 1-800-994-WOMAN or 1-888-220-5446 (TDD), or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov/> To request weekly health tips by e-mail, click on the box that says, "Click Here for weekly health tips by e-mail."